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Wilma Lewis

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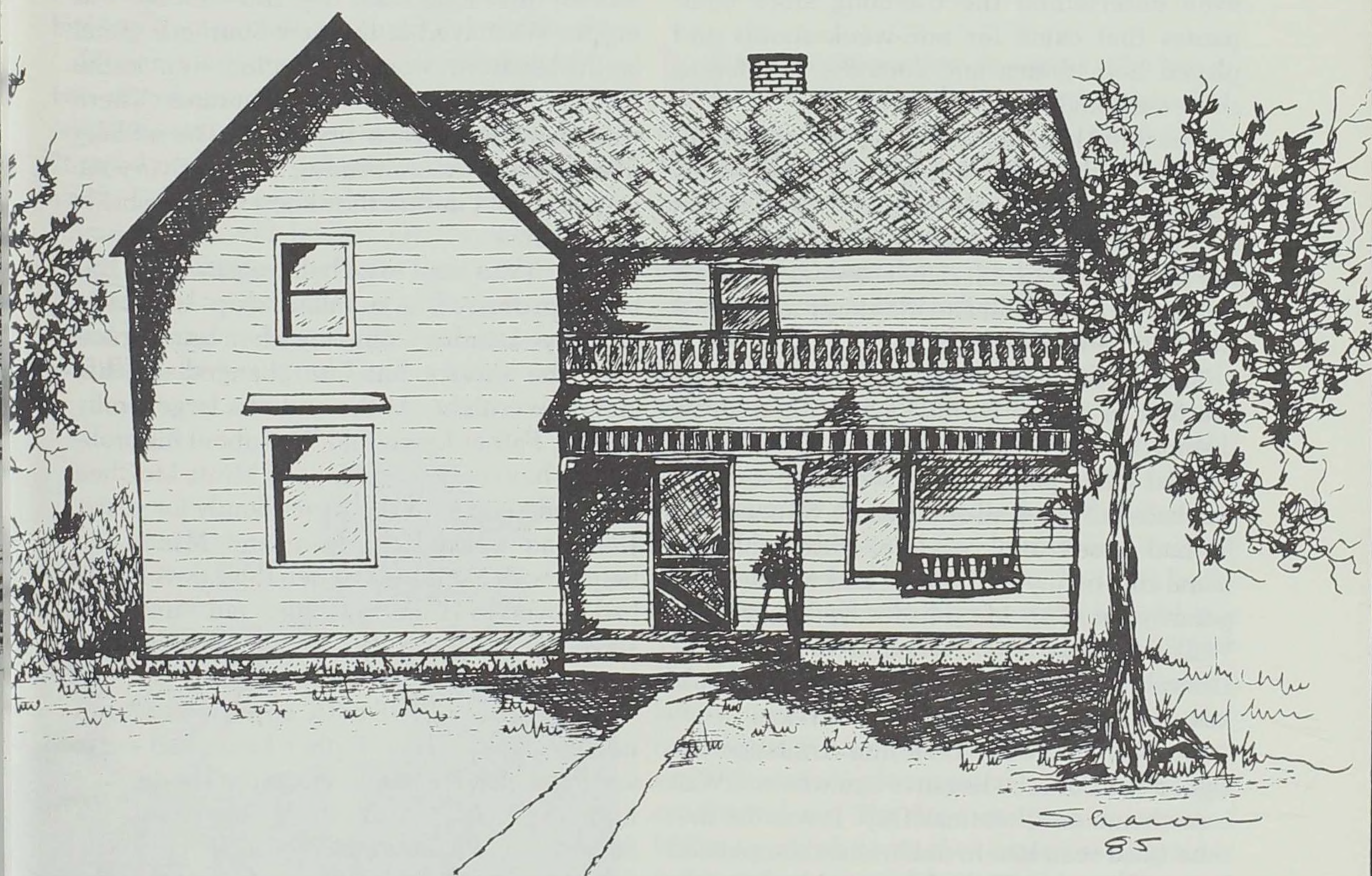
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The House on the Hill

by Wilma Lewis



"The House on the Hill" is dedicated to Walt. Without him there would have been no love, no house on the hill — no article.

It was January 7, 1919, and I had been in bed for hours, too excited to sleep. Alone in my room, I kept living over the previous five years. I thought of how Walter and I had met in 1914 at the beginning of our senior year in high school. And how we had gone to ball games,

school parties, dances, and how on Sunday evenings he had walked me home from church.

Walt's father owned a two-hundred acre farm north of town, but his mother was an invalid, and they had moved to Humeston to be closer to her doctor. Mr. Lewis had taken a position at the Humeston State Bank. He hoped that Walt would return to the farm where he had been born and raised after his high school graduation, but Walt had made friends with the manager of the Hawkeye Lumber Company and wanted to become a lumberman. When Mr. Sterrett at the lum-

lumberyard had offered Walt a job, Mr. Lewis had consented.

My father and mother owned the old opera house in Humeston and ran movies four nights a week. My mother and I had sold tickets and even entertained the traveling stock companies that came for one-week stands and played both drama and comedy, a different show each night.

One thing happened to change Walt's world; his mother died after a long illness. After this, Mr. Lewis, Walt, and Nellie, his sister, moved into a boarding and rooming house. Though the Lewis trio soon felt right at home, losing his mother brought Walt and me closer together. I was glad he needed me.

Then had come the war and Walt was among the first to enlist. He had given me a lovely diamond engagement ring for my birthday and we had made plans for our wedding. But the war had shot down all our dreams. So one night he had kissed me good-bye, kissed the diamond ring on my cold finger, and walked temporarily out of my life. I had stayed busy while Walt was away and worked at the James R. Humphrey Creamery after their regular bookkeeper was drafted for military service.

On November 11, 1918, the Armistice was signed and our men began to come home. Walt came home on Christmas Day. It was the first time I had seen him in uniform and he seemed bigger than ever. He had grown older but soon his arms were around me and the loneliness just melted away. And thus on January 7, 1919, I was alone in my room with my wedding suit: a soft gray wool with a sable collar; a rose georgette blouse my mother had made, with a deep yoke of rose and cream-colored tatting made by my grandmother. I even had high gray laced shoes and a small white hat. My suitcase was packed; I was ready for the honeymoon.

The following day, January 8, 1919, I stood beside Walter Lewis in his brand new army uniform before our pastor, with my mother, dad, Father Lewis, and Nellie as our wit-

nesses. We took vows to love, honor, and obey until death did us part; a gold wedding ring was placed on my finger, and I became Mrs. Walter C. Lewis.

Our honeymoon was spent in Chicago. It was my first long train trip and Chicago was magic. We stayed at the new Southern Hotel on the lakefront, went sightseeing, went to the theater, and ate at famous restaurants. There were men in uniform everywhere. The soldiers from overseas were coming home! Everyone smiled at us. I'm sure they knew we were bride and groom.

Then it was time to go home again. Walt had been promised a managership with the Hawkeye Lumber Company when he returned from the service but fate changed our life almost overnight. At the end of a large family dinner, Father Lewis told Walt about his problems. They concerned Jiles and Minta McGhee who had been with the Lewis family for years. Jiles had worked the farm and Minta had helped with the house. When the Lewis family had moved to Humeston, Jiles and Minta had stayed at the farm as caretakers. They had become part of the family.

Now Jiles was ill with appendicitis and needed an operation. Father Lewis had made arrangements for him to enter the Centerville hospital for surgery. But who would run the farm during his absence? There seemed only one logical solution. Walt had been born and raised on those two hundred acres and could manage nicely. Minta could stay and run the house and teach me how to be a farmer's wife. When Jiles was back on the job, we could go to the lumberyard as planned.

One week later Father Lewis drove to the depot where Jiles was put on the train to Centerville. Then he drove over to my house and turned the team and buggy over to Walt. We were then on our way. We drove along the snow-covered road, all tucked in with a big fur robe. On either side of the road were fields of dried cornstalks drooping in the snow. Then

came brown plowed fields that would soon show the green of winter wheat. Pete and Ben, the big horses, knew they were on the way home. Walt and I were content there in the buggy racing through the snow. I was twenty-two years old and Walt was just twenty-four, but together we felt we could lick the world.

It was six miles to the farm. It was a big white two-story house with a wide front porch on the west side and a screened-in porch on the east. It stood on a small hill with a sweeping front yard, a family orchard on the north, surrounded by a tall hedge. On the south and down the hill stood the horse barn with a lean-to shed, and a windmill. Just to the east of these stood a bigger red barn with a silo attached. It was all really beautiful! The big house and the

red barn with roofs covered with snow were just like pictures on Christmas cards! This truly was "The House on the Hill." It would be my home for awhile.

* * *

Minta was there to welcome us. She was a short, plump, red-cheeked woman, with iron gray hair and a pleasant smile. She had no children of her own, but had cared for Walt since he was a baby. He was very special to her. We were ushered into a huge kitchen with a high ceiling, four doors, and three windows curtained with snowy white ruffled tiebacks. Off the kitchen was a big pantry with shelves from floor to ceiling on one side, a window, and a shiny DeLaval separator for milk. In the far corner was a tall old-fashioned cupboard with shelves covered with bright paper that held rows of pretty dishes. Across from this stood a worktable holding a water bucket and a sink, with a roller towel beside it. On the north wall was a long shelf with a gray ruffle around it. This was the clock shelf and it held an old Seth Thomas clock, two brightly shining kerosene lamps, and a box of matches. A huge wood-burning range, complete with a water reservoir and high warming oven, stood between the two south windows. The floor was pine and scrubbed to a pure white. In the center was a big old-fashioned square table covered with a gay oilcloth. Several chairs were nearby, and a rocking chair was in one corner.

It was an ideal family room where children could learn to read and write by the light of the big kerosene lamp sitting in the middle of the table. The front room opened off the kitchen with a bedroom on the side. Stairs leading to the upstairs bedrooms separated the kitchen from the bedroom. Minta led the way upstairs to the three bedrooms, a big west room, a small northeast room, and a south one. Off the south room there was a bathroom with a huge bathtub that had claw feet, and a large gal-



Walter and Wilma Lewis on their wedding day, 8 January 1919. (courtesy the author)

vanized tank on a high platform to hold the cistern water pumped from outside. There were no other modern conveniences.

Minta led us back down the hall to the big west room which was to be our room. It was large with three windows, long lace curtains, and a bright rag carpet on the floor. My eyes were drawn to the bed in the corner, however. It was the largest feather bed I had ever seen. I wondered if I would need a box to climb into it. It was piled high with quilts made of large wool blocks and covered with a blue-and-white woven spread. Along one wall stood a beautiful walnut chest of drawers with a mirror above it. In another corner was a big square trunk. It really was a lovely room. I'd learn to climb into that feather bed. It really did look inviting.

When the alarm went off the next morning I cautiously opened my eyes. It was still dark outside, but Walt had lit the kerosene lamp and was already dressed. I wondered what he was doing up at 5:00 in the morning, as my world didn't begin until 8:00 at home. However, I soon learned that a farm day began before daylight. There were cows to milk and horses to feed before breakfast. That was the reason for the big breakfast already on the table; the men had already done a half-day's work. There were slices of home-cured ham, eggs, fried potatoes and oatmeal, homemade bread, jelly, and great pitchers of thick cream. A large pot of coffee was boiling on the wood range. My breakfast at home had consisted of grapefruit, toast, and black coffee. I wondered what I would do with all this food!

After breakfast I asked Minta what I could do to help. I wanted to do my share of the work. She smiled at me and told me I could wash the dishes. I got down the big tin dishpan, filled it with hot water from the reservoir, got out the homemade soap, and went to work. Minta ran the DeLaval separator and took care of the milk and cream. When the dishes were washed, dried, and put away in the cupboard, the tea towel was rinsed and hung up. I was now ready

for another job. This time Minta told me I could wash the separator. It looked quite complicated to me. It had two compartments beneath the huge steel bowl that held the fresh milk, and several round metal cups. When you cranked the separator these cups spun round and round, the cream pouring out from the top compartment and the skimmed milk from the lower one. The cream was put into tall stone jars while the milk was put into two-gallon crocks and placed in the cave. I finally got the thing apart, ready to wash. I got my dishpan full of water again, reached for the bar of soap, and went to work. That's where I made my first big mistake. Minta informed me that each piece must be rinsed in clear cold water first! If washed first in hot soapy water, the milk would form a brown varnish that would have to be scraped off. I sure had learned my first big farm lesson the hard way.

One evening when Walt and I were enjoying a game of caroms and Minta was doing her mending, there was a dreadful racket in the front yard. There were loud voices and shot-guns were fired. Our neighbors had come to charivari us, to welcome the bride and groom. The community was mostly Swedish people. The young people had attended the same country school with Walt and were noisy and friendly. I liked them all very much. Minta welcomed the crowd into the kitchen, overshoes and all, where she served everyone with doughnuts and great mugs of coffee. Now I knew why Minta had made so many doughnuts the day before. It was a wonderful feeling to be welcomed into the community. What difference did it make that the snow melted off overshoes onto the floor? Tomorrow we would scrub the white pine floor, wash the coffee mugs, and put things back in order.

When tomorrow came the temperature — which had been below zero — had changed. Soft white snowflakes were falling and every tree and shrub was ridged with white. Roofs were piled high and looked like big marsh-



Jiles and Minta McGee who worked on the Lewis farm. (courtesy the author)

mallows. We kept the kitchen range and the living room round the oak heater piled high with wood and were snug and warm. The next morning the sun shone and again our world was like a giant Christmas card. Now paths had to be cleared to the horse barn, chicken house, outhouse, well, and the big east barn.

I could help shovel the snow. It was light and fluffy and we soon had all the paths cleared. I helped with the chores, too. I fed the chickens while Walt gave them fresh feed and warm fresh water. Next came the horses: Pete and Ben, the sorrel team; and Prince and Dimple, the big dapple-gray pair. They were fed corn and oats and led to the watering trough and then bedded down with fresh straw. I gathered dry wood for the kitchen range and trudged back up the hill to the house. There was milking to be done and supper to get. It had cer-

tainly been a full day for me.

In the corner of the kitchen was a wall telephone of polished wood, a big box-like affair. Since there was no electricity, it ran on batteries encased below the bells and receiver. There were eleven telephones on that one line, and each had its own ring. Ours was a long, a short, and a long. The Andersons' just down the road was a long and two shorts; the Johnsons', three short rings. A favorite pastime of the women was to listen in on the conversations. We had no daily newspaper, so the farmers depended on the telephone for all the news. There were all the important happenings in the neighborhood; a new baby, a quilting bee, and occasionally a wedding. When a man needed the phone he would yell, "Get off the line, I want to call the Veterinarian." And you could hear the receivers click as the women got off the line.

It seemed to me that living on a farm was like living on a merry-go-round. We scarcely finished one project when two more appeared. There was the butchering to be done, and trees to be cut down in the forty-acre timber pasture, sawed into stove lengths, and hauled to the house. At times I felt very confused.

Then one night I slipped out of the house and curled up on the back steps. South of me were the lights of home; to the west, the little town of Leroy; and to the north, the lights of Derby. They twinkled against the night sky and I sat in the dark, alone, crying my heart out. That's where Walt found me. He knelt down in front of me, pulled my head against his shoulder, and with his arms tight around me, asked, "Wilma, don't you want to live with me?" I only cried that much harder as I answered, "Of course I do, but I can't stay here." He pulled me closer to him and I dried my tears. I was being a baby, not a helpmate. I vowed to forget the past and begin all over again. Walt kissed me and we walked into the great house, up the stairs to our room with the big feather bed.

Jiles had never been sick in his life, but he

had a deep-seated fear of cancer. So he had demanded a complete exploratory surgery. It had taken a much longer incision than a simple appendectomy, and that caused a much longer recuperation time. On his return, he seemed tired and not at all interested in the farm. He wasn't even interested in moving about to gain his strength. We were all quite concerned. Everyone seemed on edge and unsettled.

That is when I made my second mistake. We had churning to be done one morning and Minta asked me to get out the old barrel churn, rinse it with hot water, and fill it with sour cream. The barrel hung on a wooden support with a long handle on the side. You turned the barrel over and over very slowly making the cream splash from end to end until globs of butter formed, then you opened the churn, worked the globs of yellow butter into a lump with a wooden butter paddle, and lifted it out into a bowl. Then you washed it with water and the wooden paddle until all the water was out and it was ready for the butter mold.

I remembered each step, but forgot one very important thing. In my hurry I turned the barrel too fast; the cream couldn't splash and it just stayed in the center. The end result was no butter. Minta's temper surfaced and she turned to me and said, "Wilma, I give up! You will never learn!"

Then my temper flared and I answered with some heat. "I came out of an office where I was efficient and capable. You wouldn't have fit in there any better than I do here." Then I calmly finished the churning, emptied the buttermilk into tall stone jars, carried them to the cave, and considered the incident closed.

Father Lewis was spending more time with us at the farm. He had a small northeast bedroom furnished with his own things, so he could come and go as he pleased. He knew he was always welcome. He and Walt worked in the timber together, carefully choosing the trees to be cut down, trimmed, and sawed into lengths ready to be hauled to the woodpile near

the house. It was good for the two of them to be together again. They had so much to talk over, and years to live again. They carried their lunches, ate them in the sun, sitting on a fallen log close to the creek, and learned to know each other all over again. Father Lewis had brought his bride, Etta, there many years ago. It had also been his birthplace. Walt had been born there, too, long before the big house on the hill had been built. So much had happened in the years since then. Now they were together sitting in the sun.

In the house Minta and I were getting ready for the big butchering day. Early in the morning Frank and Mollie Lowe would drive over from across the field to help. We would butcher two hogs that morning and hang them in the shed to cool out. When that was done, the hogs would be cut down and laid out on the trestles. Hams and shoulders, back bones and tenderloins all would be cut, ready to be taken to the kitchen. There, the women's work really began. The hams and shoulders would be trimmed of all excess fat. This would be laid aside for the big lard kettle. The hams and shoulders would be rolled in a mixture of salt, brown sugar, and cayenne pepper, then wrapped in heavy brown paper, ready to cure. These would be hung over the bathtub to drip and cure. No more baths in the tub until they were ready to store away. There was sausage to be made from the pieces of meat cut from the hams and shoulders, ground in a hand sausage grinder, seasoned with salt, pepper, and sage, and made into patties. These were fried, then put in glass jars, and stored in the cave. They would make good eating next summer.

Then it was time to render lard. All the extra fat was cut into small cubes and piled up in pans. The men got out the huge black iron kettle and a wood fire was built under it. Minta and I carried out the fat cubes and they were slowly dropped into the hot kettle and the liquid fat soon started to boil. The cubes were cooked until, when pressed with a fork, they

came out dry and hard. Then they were put into a lard press, and the hot lard siphoned off, so that only dry cracklings were left. The lard was poured into great stone jars, ready to be stored in the big cave. The cracklings would later be made into soap. Minta also knew how to make headcheese and pickled pigs' feet, but that could be done another day.

* * *

January slipped by and soon it was February. Every day brought the usual round of farm chores. The sun thawed the snow and the roads became deep in mud. Going to town became an all-day trip, so we seldom made it. Our rural mail carrier came with a horse and buggy and we looked forward to letters, papers, magazines, and spring sales catalogues from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. Best of all were the spring catalogues from Earl E. May and the Henry Field Seed Company, with their pages of bulbs, trees, shrubs, and gaily colored flowers. I spent long evenings deciding what I wanted for spring planting.

In March, Jiles and Minta decided to go back to their old home in the White Breast country, north and east of us. When they were packed and ready to leave, neighbors came with teams and wagons to help them move. Everyone loved them. Jiles and Minta would be missed by everyone. Now the house really was cold and bare.

But Walt and I made a list of the furniture we would need for downstairs. Early the next morning we drove to Humeston to shop. We chose everything in oak with good grain and lustre. The next day the Andersons, our neighbors to the north, came with teams and wagons to help Walt bring all our new furniture home. It was unloaded and rugs were laid and furniture put in place before the Andersons went home. There was a bright rug on the living room floor, a leather-covered six-foot davenport that made into a bed, and two bright oak

rocking chairs. Mother and Dad had given me my piano and mahogany music cabinet. The living room was really lovely now.

The bedroom rug was a soft blue, the bedstead oak with springs and mattress. No more feather bed here! In one corner was a big oak dresser with a big mirror above it. In another corner stood a tall chest of drawers. My cedar chest filled with linens completed the bedroom.

But the kitchen was my pride and joy. We chose blue-and-white linoleum for the floor, a big round oak table, and six matching chairs. An oak buffet had two small drawers, one for the silverware and one for my linen napkins. Below the drawers were two shelves, one for tablecloths and one for my special embroidered tea towels. The clock shelf was still on the north wall. The old Seth Thomas clock, the kerosene lamps, and the matches were still in their respective places. Mother had bought a new Singer sewing machine and had given me her old one, a treadle Domestic she had used to make my baby clothes. This would stand under the south window, where I would soon be making blue-and-white checked gingham curtains for my kitchen.

There was a big shining Monarch range with a high warming oven and the usual hot water reservoir. Walt had moved the cream separator to the screened-in back porch. In its place stood a three-burner oilstove with an oven; no more meals in a hot kitchen. Mealtime in the summer would be far more comfortable.

We soon had the linoleum on the floor, both rugs down, and the furniture all in place. It was really very beautiful. Now it was really our home. Walt and Father Lewis could go back to their chores. I would be busy making curtains for each new room.

Father Lewis gave us our first automobile as a housewarming gift. It was a shiny black touring car with black side curtains that could be buttoned down in case of rain. Now our trips to town would be easier. We could even drive to Leroy in the evenings for groceries. Humeston

was a little farther away so we could drive there for Saturday night band concerts, spend Sunday with Mother and Dad, and still get home to do the chores.

There was a great deal to do in March. There were logs to be cut and hauled to the wood lot, and the sheep to be driven from the lower pasture. The expectant ewes would be placed in the orchard north of the house, the older ones in the east lot.

One night I wakened Walt, sitting upright, coughing and choking. I couldn't get my breath, and when I did, it was an agonizing wheeze. Walt put cold cloths on my throat and my feet in hot water, but still I choked. At daylight he telephoned my mother, who told him to wrap me in a blanket, put me in the car, and bring me to her.

When we arrived Mother took one look at me and said, "Asthma. And I know just what to do; my father had it all his life. I'll take care of her, Walt. You go back home; she'll be all right." I'm not sure what remedy she used, but in a few days I was good as new and ready to go back home. It was years later that I found out that I was allergic to sheep and wool.

Lambing time was over and mothers and baby lambs were moved to the east lot and the older ewes were moved across the road to our new pasture. Walt and I had been given a puppy, a gift from old friends on a farm miles south of us. She was a collie, a beautiful all-white puppy with soft brown eyes. She had royal blood and we named her Princess, and she lived up to her name. She was most intelligent, eager to learn, and responded well to orders. She loved to work with the cattle, but sheep were her favorites. She took special care with lambs, seeming to know they were only babies. Soon she became known as the best sheep dog in the country. She obeyed Walt implicitly, but she adored me. She was really my dog, and followed me whenever she wasn't working for Walt.

The day Walt and Father Lewis decided to

move the old ewes across the road to another pasture arrived gray and very cloudy. The ground was already wet and soggy, the road in puddles. It would be a rush to get the ewes settled before the weather broke. The sheep were restless and huddled together as though they sensed the coming storm. Then the storm began, with cold driving rain and thunder and lightning. The sheep were wet and cold and bolted back again and again. Walt and Father Lewis were cold and wet to the skin. Princess became confused and frightened, and refused to obey Father Lewis. Suddenly he lost his temper. He was so proud of her and now she had failed him. He picked her up by one hind leg and threw her into the mud. She wasn't hurt, so she scrambled up and, with drooping tail and ears, headed straight for home and me.

When the sheep were finally moved and in



Wilma and the lambs. (courtesy the author)

the new pasture, the two men came home, exhausted, wet, and muddy. I was on my knees in the kitchen with Princess in a washtub of warm water, washing the mud out of her long silky hair. Princess was licking my hands and I was crying my heart out. Father Lewis was truly sorry, and I understood and accepted his apology. But Princess never did. After that incident, when she worked with Walt and Father Lewis came near, she lifted her head, waved her white-plumed tail, and headed for the house and me. It hurt Father Lewis deeply. He truly loved that dog, but Princess never forgot.

April arrived and we were on that merry-go-round again. There was wheat to be drilled into the rich black soil, oats to be sowed, and then would come corn planting time. In between times, Walt built me a brooder house and I ordered five hundred day-old chicks from the Henry Field Seed Company. Then there was the big garden to be plowed and planted. It was all a race against time.

In May, Walt's sister came to spend the summer with us. I enjoyed her; she was the sister I never had. She was quite grown up, a junior in high school. She had spent her vacations on the farm with Jiles and Minta since she was eight years old. She knew all about farm life and was a great help to me, besides being good company. With Nellie now with us, Father Lewis spent more time with us. He took over the vegetable garden. We ordered seeds of all kinds from Henry Field, who carried hundreds of different things. Our seed potatoes were all stored in the cave. We got them out and cut them in pieces so that each piece would have an eye that would grow a potato vine. I could hardly wait to see long rows of green sprouts bursting through the rich black loam.

Nellie helped me with the housework and chores and taught me how to care for those five hundred baby chicks. The months rushed by and soon it was August. The corn was tall with

big ears weighting down the stalks; the oats and wheat were golden. Mother Nature was at her best.

August drifted into September and it was time for Nellie to go back to school. It had been such a happy summer for us. Father Lewis would be going back to town, too, only coming to the farm for weekends. Walt and I would be alone.

Next would come the threshing of oats. The neighbors had formed a ring for threshing and had a company machine. They moved onto each farm until the work was done. The oats that had been shocked in the field were loaded onto big hayracks, then the oat shocks were pitched into the big machine, near the house. The straw would be blown out into a big stack to be used for bedding down the stock during the winter. Walt made a trip to town for coal to run the machine. Any leftover coal would be used for the kitchen range. Mamie and Ernina Anderson, our neighbors, would help me cook for the twenty-four men who would come to help.

The machine rolled into our driveway early one morning with its three-man engineering crew. It was my day to have the threshers. I had planned to have fried chicken and all that went with it, several vegetables from the garden, and pickles and milk from the cave. There would also be tapioca cream pudding, two kinds of pie, and a big cake. I had been warned that the men would be starved by noon. I had been up since 4:30 and everything was under control.

But I hadn't thought about the neighbors. They all came to help Walt's new wife with her first threshing crew. Everyone pitched in and helped. After all, they had been doing this for years. We all visited while we worked. Finally, dinner was over, the dishes washed, and the kitchen in order. Tired neighbors climbed into their wagons and headed for home. I was dead tired, but very happy. This had been another lesson in farming. I had enjoyed my neighbors

and was grateful for their help. I would welcome a nice warm bath, then the bed and sleep. Walt would finish the chores and be ready to rest, too. Tomorrow would be another threshing day and we two would go and help our neighbors just like they had helped us.

Almost before the threshing was over, it was time to pick the apples. The trees were heavy with Red Jonathans and Golden Maiden Blush. They would be stored for winter in big barrels along one side of the cave, along with the bins of potatoes. Nellie and I had canned fruit and vegetables and the shining quart jars stood on shelves on the opposite side. There was still room for jars of cream, milk, and the fresh butter. With our cured meat, lard, and sacks of flour and sugar, no one would go hungry.

Walt scrubbed and aired the cave and the barrels were all in place. Ladders were carried to the orchard and leaned against the tree trunks, and we were ready to pick apples. I was a little doubtful about my ladder but I watched Walt climb to the top rung, balance his bucket, and reach for the topmost bough. I had no interest in doing that. I'd settle for the low branches and feel safe. Already the rungs of the ladder hurt my feet and my arms were scratched by the branches. I stayed with it until Walt said it was time to do the chores and get supper. I was stiff and sore and my feet hurt as I staggered into the house, got supper, and fell into bed. I wondered if I would ever enjoy apples again.

When morning came I gingerly put my feet to the floor. I was just one big ache. Walt was very sympathetic, then said, "Oh, you'll get used to it." I knew better. I was sure I couldn't get through another day of apple picking. But I could, and I did. Father Lewis came out to help and the barrels in the cave were soon full of apples. They would really be good in the winter. I had soon forgotten my aches and pains.

September came along and was ablaze with color, brilliant reds, yellows, and soft browns.

It was too nice for me to stay indoors. Walt always took salt to the cattle in the timber pasture on Sunday mornings. The tall trees, the lush green grass, and the creek running through it made it an ideal place until the snow came. One morning Walt insisted that I ride over to the pasture with him. Riding horses was not my cup of tea, but he assured me that Pet was gentle and slow and I would learn to enjoy her. He would ride Shorty, Nellie's sorrel pony. Shorty was a little harder to handle, but Walt could manage him quite well.

So the horses were saddled. Walt put my left foot into the stirrup and I heaved myself into the saddle. The ground seemed so far away. Pet seemed to get taller by the minute. Walt showed me how to hold the reins and I was as ready as I would ever be. Walt swung himself into the saddle and we were on our way. Pet ambled along beside Shorty and I relaxed. This might be fun after a few more lessons. We slowly made our way to the timber pasture, salted the cattle, and headed back toward home. It was only a little more than a mile away, along a soft dirt road that ran west for three-quarters of a mile, then turned south to the farm. Shorty and Walt had fallen a little behind Pet and me. Nellie and Walt had made this trip together many times and, traditionally, when they turned the corner they raced to the gate. As we turned the corner Pet thought the race was on and headed for home. I froze and sat in the saddle like a clothespin on a line. Walt yelled at me, "Hang on, Wilma. She'll stop at the gate." There wasn't much else I could do. I grabbed the saddle horn with both hands and held on for dear life. Sure enough, Pet stopped at the gate. She had won the race and I had just gone along for the ride. I rolled off and tottered up toward the house. Walt assured me that I had done quite well and would do much better the next time. Next time? Perhaps there would be a next time. I doubted it. But there were many next times and I learned to love the days Walt and I rode

together.

October came and more glorious fall days. Dusk came early to Iowa. The cattle were brought up from the south pasture and put into the feedlot, where they were fed corn. They would be shipped to Chicago; corn-fed cattle brought top prices. Each afternoon about 4:00 we put on our heavy coats and stocking caps, and grabbed our cotton flannel gloves so we could feed the cattle in long wooden bunks. A wagonful of corn stood close by. Walt shoveled



*Wilma and her mother, Olive Barker, in 1924.
(courtesy the author)*

it into the bunks and it was my job to break the ears into three pieces by hitting them on the bunks. When the cattle heard the sound they jostled and crowded each other for first place. When the gates were opened they raced over for their evening meal. Walt and I would lean on the fence and dream about the price they would bring.

October turned into November and still the days were sunny, though cold. Now was the

time to husk corn. Stalks in the fields were heavy with golden ears. The wagons were fitted with high right sides, called bangboards. The men wore husking mittens with a metal peg on one hand to pull down and remove the ears of corn from the stalks. Then the ears were thrown up against the bangboards, and they fell into the wagons. Men who could husk one hundred bushels of corn a day were in great demand. They were strong, young men, with large hands and thick wrists. Walt had long, slender fingers and small wrists and he never tried for a record. His wrists would be swollen after a day of husking and pained him so he couldn't sleep. His hands grew chapped and sore, his body ached, and he was miserable. We bought husking mittens by the dozen. They grew wet with the frost and were worn out in one day.

During husking season we got up long before daylight so Walt could do the chores and get to the cornfield as soon as daylight came. My days were long and I was lonely. Walt drove in with his first load about 11:00, had lunch and coffee, and hurried back to the field. November days were short and there were chores to do before dark. I wanted to go along in the afternoon and finally Walt consented. I bundled up, then he gave me a pair of mittens and a husking peg, and I was on my own. He could husk two rows of corn at a time. I could manage only one. I was next to the wagon so I wouldn't miss when I tossed the ears toward it. At first, I thought I could never learn to shuck the husk down and snap the ear. Finally, I learned the rhythm and really enjoyed it. Walt threw his ears over my head and I learned to dodge to keep from getting hit. In late afternoon we climbed on our loaded wagon and headed for home, Walt to unload the corn and do the chores, while I got our supper. Then two very tired people fell into bed.

The days grew colder, but there was very little snow and we had only a few rows of corn left standing. We were hoping for clear

weather until they were done. Then suddenly it was Thanksgiving. That was the day my family attended services at the Methodist Church and then the Ladies' Aid served an old-fashioned turkey dinner, including the traditional pumpkin pie. Dad, Mother, and I had attended for years. We knew everyone who would be there. It was a time for visiting friends. I had our clothes ready. It was planned that Walt and I would drive to town, join Dad and Mother, Father Lewis and Nellie, and have a wonderful day.

Suddenly all plans were changed. Father Lewis telephoned to tell us that heavy snow was forecast for Thursday. He said that he and Nellie had a four-day vacation, so they would be out early Thursday morning and that he would help Walt finish husking the corn before the predicted snow arrived. But what about me? What about my plans for Thanksgiving Day in town? Walt explained that all the corn must be out before the snow fell or it would have to stay in the field until spring. This was the way it had to be done and I unwillingly agreed. Of course, I knew that he was right; I was being selfish.

Thanksgiving morning came and I dressed a big fat hen. We would have roast chicken and sage dressing. There were plenty of vegetables in the cave. I would bake two apple pies to serve with thick cream. We would need one for supper. What I really wanted to do was cry and feel sorry for myself. But there wasn't time to indulge in self-pity. Father Lewis and Nellie arrived and the men hurried to the field. Nellie and I had much to talk about. It was her senior year in school and we talked about her plans for college the following year. It really turned out to be a pleasant day. Everyone enjoyed the roast chicken and apple pie at noon. Then the men hurried back to the field as snow clouds appeared in the west. The weather had changed for the worse.

The men had almost finished the field when the first snowflakes drifted down. But those

lazy first snowflakes soon became almost a blizzard. The men hurried to the barn, leaving the wagon to be unloaded the next day. Father Lewis wanted to get back to Humeston before the snow drifted on the roads. I wrapped the chicken and an apple pie in oiled paper, kissed Nellie good-bye, and they were on their way.

When they were gone, Walt started to tell me why this all had to be, but I needed no explanation. I could understand why. Soon the snow would cover the cornfield until late spring. I had done some growing up in the previous twenty-four hours.

Soon I began to wonder where the year had gone. It was almost time for Christmas. Dad and Mother had always made so much of Christmas, with holly wreaths in every window, a big cardboard Santa Claus in the west window to welcome guests, and a gaily decorated tree with a shining angel on the topmost branch. That angel had been on my first Christmas tree. It couldn't be Christmas without that. Dad loved to buy gifts and smuggle them into the house and hide them under his bed. I never peeked at them. That would have spoiled all his fun.

Mother used her very best linen tablecloth and embroidered napkins, all the cut glass and French Haviland china, with a centerpiece of holly and red candles in a low-cut glass bowl. There was always turkey and dressing, fluffy mashed potatoes, yams covered with butter and brown sugar, scalloped corn, relishes, and the traditional mince pie. Mother always made her own mincemeat from Grandmother's recipe, and there was none better.

Father Lewis and Nellie would be there, too. That was our family. Walt and I finished the chores early, piled all our gifts into that shiny black Ford, and were soon on our way to Humeston and home. The day was cold and crisp, with only a light snow on the ground, so the roads were good. Mother and Dad were all ready for us, the table sparkling, as usual. Dad had piled all the gifts under the big tree with

my shining angel on top. It was just as though I had never been away. Father Lewis and Nellie came later with gifts for everyone. Dad distributed them and we all exclaimed over our gaily wrapped packages: "It was just what we wanted!"

The wrappings and ribbons were gathered up, the room was back in order, and Mom's dinner was served. Everything was delicious, as Mom's meals always were. We enjoyed every mouthful and were almost too full for the mince pie. When dinner was over, the dishes were washed and put away, and then we ladies chose an easy chair to relax in and visit. We talked about other Christmastimes and made plans for next year. When it was time to say

good-bye, Walt and I gathered up our Christmas gifts, climbed into the car, and drove back to the farm. It was dusk and Christmas lights sparkled everywhere. The sky was a deep blue, all spangled with bright stars. It had been a perfect day. I kept thinking of the Twenty-third Psalm: "My cup runneth over." I had never been so happy in my life.

On New Year's Eve we were invited to the Andersons', our Swedish neighbors just down the road. Chris and Elizabeth had been born in Sweden, married young, and come to America. They had seven children, all grown. Oscar and Albert were married and lived on farms of their own. Next was Mamie, a practical nurse who assisted our country doctor and cared for moth-



From left to right (back row): Al Barker, Wilma's father; Seman Lewis, Walt's father; Chris Anderson, a neighbor; Wilma Lewis; and Mamie Anderson. From left to right (front row): Walter Lewis; Nellie Lewis, Walter's sister; Carlton Lewis, Walter and Wilma's son; and Lisson Anderson. (courtesy the author)

ers and newborn babies. Then came Willie, Fred, and Victor, big blonde Swedes, always pleasant and willing to help wherever needed. On snowy bad days, the three would stop at our house to visit and drink thick black coffee and eat cookies. They always made a bright spot in my day. The last of the seven was golden-haired Ernina, just Nellie's age. They would all be home for New Year's Day. The Anderson home was large enough to accommodate the big family with a great long table in the dining room, big enough to seat the whole family.

There was plenty of snow then, but the roads were clear and soon the jingle of sleigh bells announced the arrival of Oscar and Albert with their families. All the women went to the kitchen to dish up the dinner. There was roast pork and chicken, four kinds of vegetables, lingonberries (berries that were much like our cranberries), pickled herring cut into squares, two kinds of cake, fruit, and two kinds of pie. The table simply groaned with food. Chris sat at the head of the table with Elizabeth at his left. Walt and I were seated at his right. The rest of the family chose their own places. Chris raised his fork in one hand, his knife in the other, and said, "We might as well commence." And commence we did. Big dishes covered the table and soon plates were loaded. I wondered how we could eat all that food, but eat it we did, every crumb, and were stuffed but content. Things were cleared away and we all went into the big parlor with its glowing round oak stove, while in one corner stood an old-fashioned organ with high mirrored back. Mamie played quite well and we all gathered round and sang old familiar songs.

Soon it was time to go home to do our chores, so good-byes were said and the sleigh bells jingled as Oscar and Albert drove down the road. Walt and I thanked the Andersons for a Happy New Year and wished them many more, bundled into our coats, fastened our overshoes, and walked up the road to our House on the Hill. Again, my cup runneth

over. Walt and I were facing our New Year together.

The year brought the same farm merry-go-round again. The two carloads of cattle would be readied for shipping to Chicago. Walt would ride the freight train with them to see that they were watered and fed. Then would come the buyers and the bidding. We were hoping for high prices. After that, time would be spent in the timber cutting wood for next year; the sheep would be brought in from the south field and divided into two groups, the old ones to be brought to a small fenced pasture to be sheared, the ewes that were to lamb would be placed near the farm. But it was a good merry-go-round with breaks for the Fourth of July, or a carnival, and, of course, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Variations, both good and bad, lay ahead for Walt and me, but our first year in the House on the Hill was an unforgettably happy one.

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Walt and Wilma Lewis spent seven years in the House on the Hill before the opportunity presented itself for Walt to return to his planned career as a lumberman. The farm years had been years of great happiness for them and had included the birth of their son, Carlton. The farm years had been years of mixed economic fortunes for them, however, and had become increasingly difficult by the mid-1920s. In 1926 Walt was offered the managership of the Hawkeye Lumber Company's Lenox lumberyard. As Wilma remembered: "And somehow I knew my dreams would come true again. I had married a lumberman who became a farmer. Now he would go back to the beginning again. . . . We were two happy people. All our dreams were going to come true." □